

MONTANA HISTORIC PROPERTY RECORD
For the Montana National Register of Historic Places Program and State Antiquities Database

Montana State Historic Preservation Office
Montana Historical Society
PO Box 201202, 1410 8th Ave
Helena, MT 59620-1202

Property Address: **217 N. 27th Street**

Historic Address (if applicable): **None**

City/Town: **Billings, MT**

Site Number: **24 YL 1866**

(An historic district number may also apply.)

County: **Yellowstone**

Historic Name: **Yellowstone County Courthouse**

Original Owner(s): **Yellowstone County**

Current Ownership ☐ Private ☒ Public

Current Property Name: **Yellowstone County Courthouse**

Owner(s): **Yellowstone County**

Owner Address: **217 N. 27th Street**
Billings, MT

Phone:

Legal Location

PM: **Montana** Township: **1N** Range: **26E**

SW ¼ SW ¼ SW ¼ of Section: **33**

Lot(s): **13**

Block(s): **59**

Addition: **Billings Original Townsite** Year of
Addition: **Unknown**

USGS Quad Name: **Billings West** Year: **1957**
updated 1975

Historic Use: **Courthouse**

Current Use: **Courthouse**

Construction Date: **1956-57** ☐ Estimated ☒ Actual

☒ Original Location ☐ Moved Date Moved:

UTM Reference www.nris.mt.gov/topofinder2

☐ NAD 27 ☒ NAD 83 (preferred)

Zone: **12** Easting: **693886** Northing: **5073116**

National Register of Historic Places

NRHP Listing Date:

Historic District:

NRHP Eligible: ☒ Yes ☐ No

Date of this document: **March 11, 2010**

Form Prepared by: **Diana J. Painter, PhD**

Address: **3518 N. C Street, Spokane, WA 99205**

Daytime Phone: **(707) 364-0697**

MT SHPO USE ONLY

Eligible for NRHP: ☒ yes ☐ no

Criteria: ☒ A ☐ B ☒ C ☐ D

Date: 11/16/2010

Evaluator: Kate Hampton

Comments:

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Property Name: **Yellowstone County Courthouse**

Site Number: **24 YL 1866**

ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

X See Additional Information Page

Architectural Style: **Modern** If Other, specify:

Property Type: **Institutional** Specific Property Type: **Courthouse**

Architect: **Chandler C. Cohagen** Architectural Firm/City/State: **Chandler C. Cohagen, Architect, Billings, MT**

Builder/Contractor: **C.B. Lauch** Company/City/State: **C. B. Lauch, Boise, ID**

Source of Information: **Newspaper article**

Location and setting. The Yellowstone County Courthouse is an eight-story building with a square footprint and a flat roof. It is located at 217 N. 27th Street in downtown Billings and occupies roughly one-quarter of the block bounded by 3rd Avenue North toward the northwest; N. 26th Street toward the northeast; 2nd Avenue North toward the southeast; and N. 27th Street toward the southwest. The main entrance to the building is on 3rd Avenue North, across from the U.S. Department of the Interior, which is in the historic Elks Lodge/Chamber of Commerce building.

The secondary entrance faces N. 27th Street and Billings City Hall, to which it is connected with a pedestrian overpass. The rear of the building faces a park that occupies the south quarter of the block. The remainder of the block to the northeast and southeast is taken up by a parking lot and construction site. The setting is urban, in the heart of downtown Billings. Many of the surrounding buildings are government offices, a number of them in historic and architecturally significant buildings. There are also, however, many surface parking lots and parking structures.

Materials and construction. The Yellowstone County Courthouse is a Modern building, designed by Chandler C. Cohagen with associated architect Harry Loners, and constructed in 1957. The building is reinforced concrete with polished granite and glazed terra cotta finishes and aluminum and anodized aluminum frames for the windows and doors. It has a concrete foundation and a built-up roof.

Design and massing. The Yellowstone County Courthouse is cubic in form. The main entrances are recessed within the building form but additionally covered by a flat canopy with a tall aluminum fascia that projects from the building face. The entry at the west corner of the building, constructed ca. 1990 is covered by a gabled shape that projects from the face of the building at the second floor, creating a covered entry at the first level. This form anchors the east end of the pedestrian overpass to City Hall to the west, which occurs at the second floor of both buildings. The building roof contains a penthouse toward the middle, which is not visible from the ground.

A narrow walkway that extends the full width of the building is located at the basement level on the southeast (back) façade. It is enclosed by a retaining wall about six feet from the face of the building. It is accessed by foot from the east via a concrete stair from the alley between the Courthouse and the lot next door. It is accessed by vehicles by a steep concrete ramp that leads from 2nd Avenue North to this lower level. The ramp is retained by concrete walls and located parallel to the alley.

The building is largely symmetrical, with each building face displaying essentially the same fenestration pattern and design features. The office windows are enframed by the solid cladding of polished pink granite. Contrasting fenestration patterns are located within this granite frame high on the wall at the main entry level and at the top floor.

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ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

Floors two through seven have ribbon windows composed of slightly vertically-oriented windows with an upper fixed light and a lower operable light that is about one-third the height of the upper light. Mullions separating the windows are clad in glazed terra cotta, as are the spandrel panels. The spandrel panels are made up of nine tiles with horizontal reveals. They are slightly darker in color than the vertical mullions, which are continuous from floor to floor. Both the tiles and mullions have a pale, mottled surface.

At the upper level are five bays of ganged windows. These windows are of the same design as the one-over-one-windows seen on the main body of the building, but are recessed within the building face and display no mullions or other architectural details. At the lower level, on the ground floor, are continuous rows of tall, one-over-one-light windows recessed slightly within their openings and separated by terra cotta-clad panels. The panels are composed of two terra-cotta tiles. The vertical mullions separating these windows (or windows and louvers in some cases) are clad in the same granite as the rest of the building. Frames on these windows are dark, anodized aluminum, as they are elsewhere on the building. The granite cladding at this level is scored in horizontal bands encircling the building, subtly emphasizing the base.

Northwest façade. The main entry to the building is centered within the northwest-facing façade, under the deep entry overhang. The entryway is canted, with two large, plain, granite-clad columns framing the entry doors. There are four entry doors; a double door with full-height glass in the center, and two single doors at each end. They are separated by narrow, full-height, two-light windows. Above this ensemble are transom windows with the same fenestration pattern, surmounted by a solid panel. All have aluminum frames. The names of the functions carried out by county government are incised in the granite panels to each side. At the main public corner of the building, at N. 27th Street and 3rd Avenue NORTH are the words "Yellowstone County Court House," also incised in granite. Also at this corner, on both the northwest and southwest facades at the top of the building, are large, contemporary clock faces set flush within the granite panels.

Southwest façade. The southwest façade of the building faces City Hall. A large entry bay is also centered on this façade. It is recessed within a squared opening and consists of four aluminum-frame doors with full-height glass and transom windows, with a solid panel above. An aluminum-clad canopy covers this opening, similar to the canopy on the main façade. There are no other features on this façade that distinguish it from the other facades.

Southeast façade. The southeast façade displays the same fenestration pattern as the northwest façade at the lower level, with the exception of the entry below the pedestrian overpass and the fact that one of the windows bays has a flush metal door within the opening. The ca 1990 pedestrian overpass is described above. The second level is covered by a steeply pitched gable that continues to the ground level in large, square columns and pilasters clad in granite at the base, with terra cotta-colored cladding above. On the right column is a bronze plaque that spells out the Bill of Rights. The pedestrian overpass at the second level forms a roof for the first level opening in this location, which is below grade and accessed by concrete steps. A single aluminum-clad door leads into the building here.

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ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

Northeast façade. The northeast façade displays the same fenestration pattern as the other facades at the lower level, with the exception that there are no openings. This façade fronts on an alley that bisects the block.

Building interiors. The public spaces within the building interior are worth noting, as they retain many historic features and display a particularly fine use of materials. The public spaces on the first two floors are clad in book-matched beige marble panels with pink and green veining (the upper floors have plain marble wainscoting). The floors are terrazzo. The main entry has a large decorative terrazzo and brass medallion in the floor that portrays a map of the county in shades of brown and beige. Another original feature in the main lobby is the wood telephone booths. The recessed soffits and lighting in the lobby are new. The middle floors are offices. The upper floor contains the original county jail, which also retains its fixtures and features. It is now used for storage.

Site and landscape design. The courthouse site occupies roughly the southwest half of the block, the building being located at the corner of 27th and 3rd and the associated park occupying the southeast half the lot. The park was the original site of the courthouse, which occupied it until the new courthouse was constructed, at which time it was demolished. The park today honors the United States veterans of foreign wars. A long sidewalk extends from 2nd Avenue North to encircle a concrete planter close to the building. Around the perimeter of this feature are free-standing panels incised with veterans' names. To the right of this memorial are two more panels with veterans' names. They flank the original courthouse bell, which is placed there to honor Vietnam veterans. Behind the bell are three flag poles. The northeast edge of the park is planted in evergreens. The southwest edge displays a variety of mature trees, including deciduous trees.

Changes over time. The Yellowstone County Courthouse has very good integrity. Great care has been taken to maintain the original features and materials of the building. The windows have been replaced but display the same design as the original. They are now framed in anodized aluminum however, rather than the original aluminum frames, which were lighter in color. The entry doors have also been replaced with the same materials and a similar design (they now meet ADA requirements). A pedestrian overpass and entry has been added at the southwest corner of the building. With these exceptions, the building retains the appearance that it did historically. Minor changes have taken place within the main public spaces of the interior.

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Property Name: **Yellowstone County Courthouse**

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HISTORY OF PROPERTY

X See Additional Information Page

Building history. The 1958 Yellowstone County Courthouse replaced a 1905 Romanesque Revival courthouse that was originally located in the southwest corner of the block. Planning for a new building began in the mid-1940s. Renovating and adding to the original building was investigated at the time, but it was decided that population growth in the county after the war necessitated building a new structure (*The Billings Gazette*, September 13, 1956:2).

The original budget for the building was \$1.5 million. The bid opening, held in February 1956, was attended by over 200 people. Hitz Construction Company of Billings was the low bidder, but their bid exceeded the budget by roughly \$500,000. As a result, the building was re-designed as a reinforced concrete structure rather than steel-frame, and put out to bid again. Another idea that was explored in order to save money was to clad the building in brick rather than granite, but this was evidently not necessary, as the building is clad in granite today. A second bid opening was held in August 1956 based on the new design drawings and specifications. The interiors of the first two floors and the basement were finished first, allowing the remainder of the interior finishes to be completed once tenants were available, which was another cost-savings measure.

Another early setback was encountered when the city challenged the county's view that the city's building codes should not apply to the building. They specifically disagreed over provisions in the fire code. Nonetheless, the building eventually got underway. Groundbreaking ceremonies were held on September 12, 1956 and attended by over 150 city and county officials and residents of the city.

INFORMATION SOURCES/BIBLIOGRAPHY

X See Additional Information Page

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"Ceremonies Mark Official Start Of New Courthouse Construction," *The Billings Gazette*, September 13, 1965, p. 2.

"Chief Justice Speaks At Dedication Rites In County Courthouse," *The Billings Gazette*, June 21, 1958, p. 1.

"Collection 2086 - Chandler C. Cohagen papers, 1907-1971," Montana State University Libraries. <http://www.lib.montana.edu/collect/spcoll/findaid/2086.php>. Accessed January 2010.

"County Contract to Be Validated," *The Billings Gazette*, January 16, 1956, p. 13.

"County Will Dedicate 8-Story Courthouse At Ceremonies Today," *The Billings Gazette*, June 20, 1958, p. 1.

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Property Name: **Yellowstone County Courthouse**

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HISTORY OF PROPERTY

A speech by local congressman Orvin B. Fjare congratulated the county and townspeople of Billings for undertaking the project, which he felt represented their interest and involvement in local government (*Ceremonies Mark Official Start Of New Courthouse Construction*).

The Courthouse was the largest single construction project in Billings in 1957. The total cost of the building when opened was two million dollars, and five of eight floors were occupied. Dedication ceremonies were held June 20, 1958 with the chief justice of the Montana Supreme Court, James T. Harrison, presiding. The dedication was attended by over 500 people; an estimated 4,000 people toured the building beforehand.

The new building stood alongside the original courthouse for one month before the older building was demolished. Fifty-year-old elm trees were also removed to construct the new building. The cost of demolishing the old Romanesque Revival courthouse was \$14,000.

Chandler C. Cohagen, Architect

Chandler Carroll Cohagen was born in Pierson, Iowa on April 24, 1889. He studied architecture at the University of Michigan College of Architecture, where he was awarded the AIA school medal, graduating with a BS in Architectural Design in 1915. While there he co-founded the national architectural fraternity Alpha Rho Chi. After forming firms with other colleagues, he founded Chandler C. Cohagen, Architect, in Billings in 1935 (over time he also practiced as McIver & Cohagen, Cohagen & Williams, and McIver, Cohagen & Williams). In the late 1930s he designed two high schools (one building and one addition) for the PWA (Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works). In 1942 he became the chief architect for Smith, Hinchman & Grylls architects of Eau Claire, WI.

Among Cohagen's most well-known works are the Mason Grand Lodge in Helena (1936); the A. V. McIver Deaconess Hospital of Billings (1950); the Governor's Mansion in Helena (1958); the Yellowstone County Courthouse in Billings (1958); and the Central Christian College in Billings (1961). The Montana State University Libraries archives holds 353 architectural drawing sets and files for works that Chandler undertook over the course of his career, representing projects spanning from 1907 to 1971. Cohagen was very active in civic and professional organizations, taught at the University of Michigan, and lectured at the College of Montana. He died in 1986.

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1957 courthouse adjacent to original 1904 courthouse

Courtesy Western Heritage Center

INFORMATION SOURCES/BIBLIOGRAPHY

"Decision Seen On Courthouse, Commissioners Will Meet Today," *The Billings Gazette*, February 29, 1956, p. 2.

Interview, Greg Erpenbauch, Facilities Manager, Yellowstone County, February 2010.

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"Second Opening Of Courthouse Bids Scheduled," *The Billings Gazette*, July 26, 1956, p. 1.

"Wreckers Begin Demolishing 55-Year-Old County Courthouse," *The Billings Gazette*, December 31, 1958, p. 2.

"Yellowstone County Courthouse is Nearing Completion," *The Billings Gazette*, December 29, 1957, p.1.

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

NRHP Listing Date:

Evaluated Under Criterion C only – more research required for A, B, of D eligibility

NRHP Eligibility: ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Individually ☐ Contributing to Historic District ☐ Noncontributing to Historic District

NRHP Criteria: ☐ A ☐ B ☐ C ☐ D

Area of Significance: Period of Significance:

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

☐ See Additional Information Page

The Yellowstone County Courthouse is significant under Criterion C as an excellent example of a mid-century government building, exemplifying the Modern characteristics of the time, and the contemporary interpretations of how a modern government building might convey a functional appearance, yet employ fine details, materials and finishes that reinforce the dignity of the building without being ostentatious.

Future research should focus on the building's significance under Criterion A. The fact that so many people were supportive of a new county courthouse, and the building was perceived as 'for the people' potential increases the significance of the building and its relationship to patterns of local history.

INTEGRITY

☐ See Additional Information Page

The building displays integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. Slight alterations include the addition of an entrance and pedestrian overpass on the southwest corner of the building. The setting has been altered slightly over time, as is common in an urban setting. Historic structures to the northwest and southwest however are still extant.

It is worth noting that both the building exterior and interior lobbies are intact. Interior lobbies, as important public spaces that are integral with the building, should be considered part of the historic significance of the building.

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PHOTOGRAPHS

Property Name: **Yellowstone County Courthouse**

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Description: **Front entry facades at N. 27th Street and 3rd Avenue N.**



Description: **Rear and alley facade viewed from south**

MONTANA HISTORIC PROPERTY RECORD
PHOTOGRAPHS

Property Name: **Yellowstone County Courthouse**

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Description: **Rear façade viewed from park southeast of building**



Description: **Front entry at N. 27th Street**

MONTANA HISTORIC PROPERTY RECORD
PHOTOGRAPHS

Property Name: **Yellowstone County Courthouse**

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Description: **Secondary entry at 3rd Avenue N.**



Description: **Pedestrian overpass at southwest corner of building**

MONTANA HISTORIC PROPERTY RECORD
PHOTOGRAPHS

Property Name: **Yellowstone County Courthouse**

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Description: **Rear entry to basement level, southeast facade**



Description: **Veterans' memorial and historic bell in plaza; window detail, typical**

MONTANA HISTORIC PROPERTY RECORD
PHOTOGRAPHS

Property Name: **Yellowstone County Courthouse**

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Description: **Signage, detail**



Description: **Signage in place, N. 27th Street**

MONTANA HISTORIC PROPERTY RECORD
PHOTOGRAPHS

Property Name: **Yellowstone County Courthouse**

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Description: **Detail of lobby; book-matched marble**

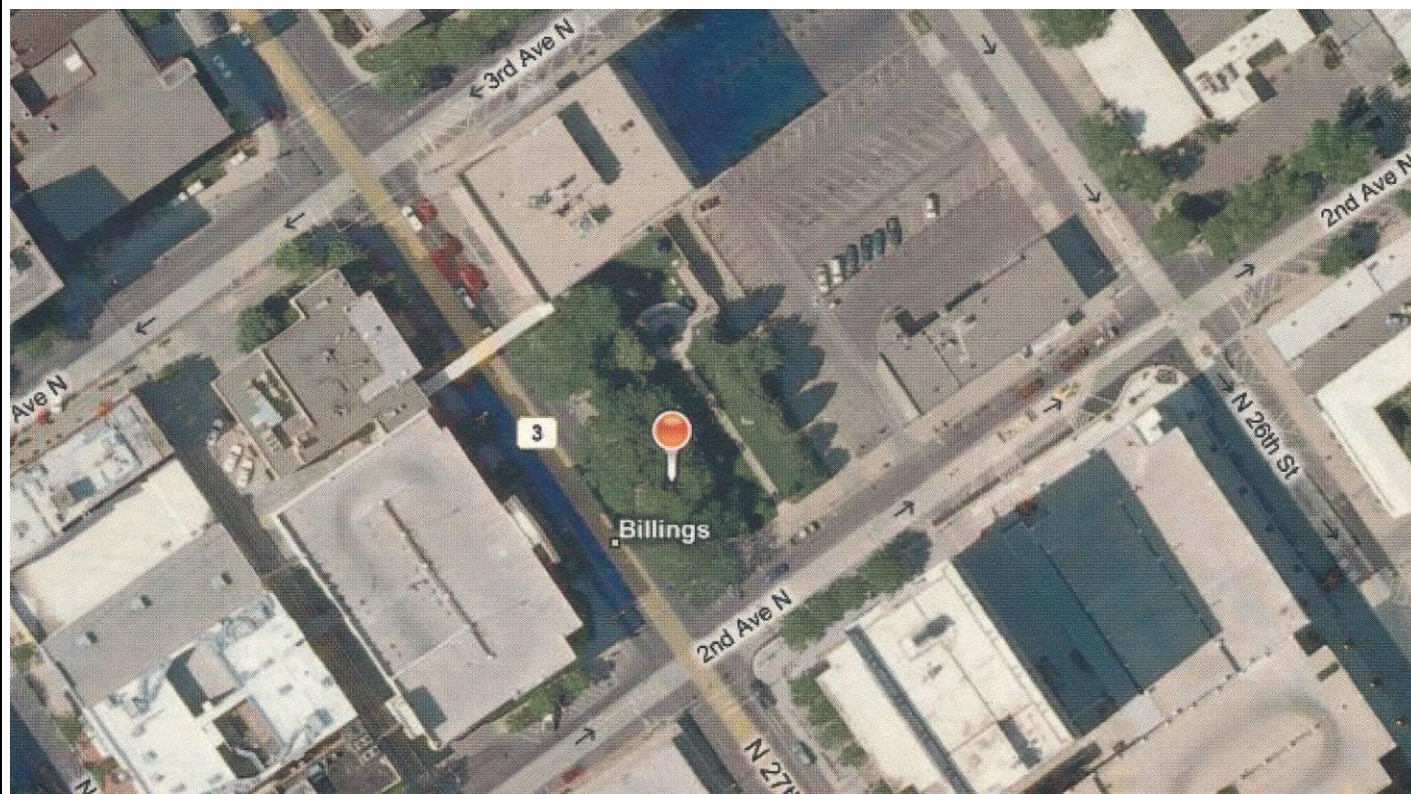


Description: **Terrazzo medallion in lobby (partially covered by rugs)**

MONTANA HISTORIC PROPERTY RECORD
SITE MAP

Property Name: **Yellowstone County Courthouse**

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MONTANA HISTORIC PROPERTY RECORD
TOPOGRAPHIC MAP

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